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## ABSTRACT

The teaching of public speaking and oral presentation is a challenge to many business communication instructors. One solution is an interdisciplinary approach involving the cooperation of the speech and business administration departments. In the first week of the quarter the business communications instructor has conferences with the students to explain that they will be required to present a 15-minute oral summation of their final reports. The students then meet with the advisors from the business college and discuss possible topics for their reports as well as the materials available for research. By the third week of the quarter, topics are formalized and a schedule for presentations is set up. By the middle of the term, each student gives a brief, oral progress report. This is followed by a discussion on oral reports and the concepts of audience, purpose, and presentation. To augment this coverage, a speech instructor takes the class for the next two periods and focuses on the specialized aspects of performance. The speeches themselves begin about the seventh week. On the day of the report, each student's outside consultant, as well as the speech instructor, is present in class to help with the evaluation. The final grade is based on the observations and criticisms of all of these faculty members. Two potential difficulties with such an experiment are scheduling and unwieldy and esoteric topics. Nevertheless, the approach does work well and improves the communication skills of the students. (HOD)

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# TEACHING ORAL PRESENTATION IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS COURSE: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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## Abstract

One of the biggest challenges facing the business communications instructor is the teaching of oral presentation. Since many teachers have an English background, the temptation is to emphasize writing at the expense of speaking. Recent studies and surveys suggest, however, that both are of equal importance to the prospective employee. This paper describes an interdisciplinary solution to this problem which involves the cooperation of other disciplines--notably speech and the various areas of business administration--in the imparting of oral communication skills.

## INTRODUCTION

At the Annual Convention of Toastmasters International held in New York in 1965, Professor Robert T. Oliver of the Pennsylvania State University remarked:

Winston Churchill with a rifle in his hand, crouched behind an earthen rampart along the Dover coast, might have repelled two or three Nazi invaders. But the same Winston Churchill, speaking with his matchless oratory, was able to marshal the global resources and inspire the will to victory that toppled Hitler's empire and preserved the democratic civilization of the Anglo-American world.

Oliver's point is well taken and one which his organization has been making for quite a while: oral communication is still one of the most effective means of reaching others. This is sometimes overlooked today in a world where the written word seems to be of prime importance. When industry and government, to say nothing of the academic sector,

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Oral Presentations--Nelson, p. 2

are spending millions of dollars on the problem of why Johnny cannot write, when workshops and symposia are being held constantly to evaluate the writing problems of almost everyone and when corporate executives publicly complain about the lack of writing skills of their recent employees, we tend to forget that speech making is also an integral part of the communication process. For those of us involved in the teaching of professional writing, however, this point is made again and again as placement officers, industry recruiters and even our own alumni respond to questionnaires and surveys with the same idea: teach more speech!

#### THE PROBLEM

For many teachers of business communications, this poses quite a challenge. The development and proliferation of such courses in the past decade has been attributable to the realization on the part of many companies that their new employees were lacking in the essential skills of composition which I mentioned above. The emphasis in many of the courses, therefore, has been on writing: reports, memos and letters. The titles of the courses even reflect this trend; for example, at my own school, the catalogue lists the course as "Business Writing." From the beginning, however, and up to the present, most business departments have urged the inclusion of a section on public speaking and oral presentation. While there are usually courses in basic speaking in most curricula, it was felt necessary to give the students preparation in the special skills of speaking to the business community.

The difficulties of including this are often compounded by the fact that many business writing instructors (and I am a prime example)

Oral Presentations--Nelson, p. 3

are English teachers by training and background. Certainly I had a public speaking course and on many occasions I had to make oral presentations in seminars. For the most part, however, my own education (and I suspect that of many of my colleagues) was firmly grounded in writing so that when teaching business communications, we tend to emphasize this at the expense of speaking. Most of us are more comfortable teaching writing skills and are, perhaps, also somewhat doubtful about the proper methods of evaluating and, subsequently, improving the speaking abilities of our students.

This, then, is the dilemma of which I have spoken. How does the teacher of business communications cover both aspects in one course? Writing is without doubt the most important communicative act which the student will be required to perform and the majority of time in the course is rightfully spent on it. More and more often, however, rising executives are called upon to "think on their feet" and speak to their colleagues. Moreover, these oral presentations are frequently comments on or summations of something that has already been committed to writing. The two acts, then, can be seen as equally important aspects of the communication process. Obviously written and oral communication have many things in common, yet they remain distinct forms and require separate coverage. In the past few terms, I have worked out a solution and an approach which provides the needed experience for the students as well as a proper evaluation of their efforts.

#### INVOLVING OTHER DISCIPLINES

In explaining my approach, I would like to stress the fact that it

Oral Presentations--Nelson, p. 4

is very much a cooperative effort and also one which involves advance planning and preparation. I strongly advise at least three months lead time to allow for sufficient contact and discussion with the people who are going to participate. Everyone involved in teaching is chronically short of time and if this procedure is to work, coordination of schedules is essential. Since I felt that I lacked some of the necessary skills, I decided to seek out those who had them and enlist their help. I first went to one of the speech teachers on campus and explained my scheme: to include a short unit on speaking for the world of business in my course. Professor Richard Goldstein readily agreed to my proposal and we began to plan our strategy. It seemed obvious that the best way of including the oral presentation was to integrate it into the overall pattern of assignments and to have it involve the student's own field of interest. The final assignment of my course is the formal report: a comprehensive research and evaluation effort in the student's area of concentration. In the preparation of this report, the students are asked to exercise and exhibit all the communication skills and strategies learned during the quarter. Since aspiring executives are often called upon to give brief oral summations of their major reports, we decided that this would be the procedure we would follow in order to make the experience even more valuable for the students.

#### COOPERATION OF THE BUSINESS COLLEGE

The next step was to enlist the aid of people who would be able to evaluate the content of the reports and to advise the students on the best sources of information. These, obviously, were to be found in the College of Business and, after several formal visits to faculty

Oral Presentations--Nelson, p. 5

meetings and more informal interviews with individual faculty members, I had a list of volunteers in accounting, management, personnel, sales and economics who were willing to give of their time and talents to this teaching experiment. Additional assistance came from an unexpected source as the school's placement director (who is always a guest lecturer in my course) mentioned that some of the recruiters visiting the campus would probably be interested in seeing a few of the presentations. After all of these contacts had been established, the experiment began.

#### PROCEDURE

In the first week of the quarter, I have conferences with each of the students in the course to explain the scope of the assignment (that all would be required to present a fifteen minute oral summation of their final reports) and to put them in contact with the instructor in their own departments. The students then meet with the advisors from the Business College and discuss possible topics for their reports as well as the materials available for research. These topics cover the full range of business interests and can include such things as recommended procedures for introducing an accounting system, feasibility studies on plant relocation and possible effects on employee morale and suggested incentive devices for use in a new sales campaign. By the third week of the quarter, topics are formalized and a schedule for presentations is set up.

As the course progresses and the students work on their regular assignments, they continue meeting with their outside advisors and researching information for their final projects. Toward the middle of the

Oral Presentations--Nelson, p. 6

term, each individual gives a brief, oral progress report based on his original proposal and the data he has gathered. Just after this, I begin covering the chapters in the textbook on oral reports and discuss in some detail the concepts of audience, purpose and presentation.

To augment my coverage, the speech professor takes the class for the next two periods and focuses on the specialized aspects of performance with which he is most qualified to deal. As part of his instruction, Dr. Goldstein explains the special importance of visuals and the significant role they play in oral communication. Although his time in class is limited by the syllabus and his own schedule, students have repeatedly indicated both on their evaluation forms and in person that they have learned more about oral presentation from his brief coverage than from the formal speech classes they have taken. This, I believe, is due to the fact that he concentrates on the specific devices and methods which are utilized in speaking in business situations. Prof. Goldstein also makes himself available during the next few days for any students who wish to consult him on the form of their upcoming presentations.

The speeches themselves begin about the seventh week. By that time, each student has conferred with someone in his area of specialization about the content of his report, has also met with a trained speech teacher about the form and has actually given a brief oral report. With this preparation, most of the students feel at least somewhat confident about giving their spoken presentations. On the day of the report, each student's outside consultant, as well as the speech instructor, is present in class to help with the evaluation. In addition, we have started to video-tape each report to further aid in showing the student

Oral Presentations--Nelson, p. 7

his strong points as well as indicating those areas needing improvement. As part of each report, a time for questions is included so as to give the students an idea of the actual conditions under which they will be required to perform in the world of work.

#### EVALUATION

Following the formal presentation, a private evaluation is given for each student at which (if possible) all three of the instructors involved are present. The final grade is based on the observations and criticisms of all of these faculty members. While the content of the report and its organization both play a part in this, most of the comment centers on the presentational aspects of the project as that was the aim of the assignment. As mentioned above, some unexpected help has come from the recruiters who come to our campus. Having been informed of our undertaking by the placement director, several of the recruiters have expressed an interest in observing one of their prospective employees and have, subsequently, attended that class presentation. These reminders of the importance of oral communication on the job have been most useful in underscoring the lessons we are attempting to teach.

#### DIFFICULTIES

Not all aspects of the experiment, however, have been completely successful or carried on without some problems. Scheduling, for one thing, has often been difficult. During one term the class might consist mainly of management majors; so many, in fact, that one outside advisor has been unable to deal with them. Because this does not become apparent until the rosters are published, it has

Oral Presentations--Nelson, p. 8

sometimes been impossible to arrange for other instructors to assist, creating too much work for one person. At other times, it proved almost impossible to get the student and his three evaluators together in one place. During another term, Dr. Goldstein had a direct class conflict with my section of Business Writing, which caused a complete breakdown in the experiment when the instructor substituting for him turned out to have no knowledge of the specialized talents required for effective oral presentations in the business world. I would strongly advise that all administrative details be worked out beforehand to avoid any of the unpleasant surprises which can result from such eventualities. There have also been problems with a few of the business instructors who tend to assign unwieldy and esoteric topics or who get irritated when their grade is not the sole basis for the final evaluation. In the two years during which I have been using this method, most, but not all of these difficulties have been worked out. Some of them were attributable to my own inexperience while others simply came about because of bad planning or lack of preparation. I do wish to explain, however, that I have no illusions that this approach is not without its difficulties or that it will work under all circumstances. At a school larger than Michigan Tech where there are dozens of sections of business communications involving hundreds of students, it probably wouldn't work at all. Cooperation of other disciplines and controllable numbers of students are absolute requisites.

#### APPRAISAL

If these can be met, however, the approach works well and, based on both student evaluations and feedback from the business department, seems to be having the desired effect--that is improving the communi-

Oral Presentations--Nelson, p. 9

cation skills of our students. Indeed, last spring one of the seniors came gleefully into my office to report that one of his prospective employers required an oral presentation as part of his interview trip. Since he had kept all his notes and charts, it was quite easy for him to redo the report he had prepared for class. Its success was attested to by the letter offering him a job which he happily displayed to me.

While not guaranteeing such positive results in all cases as there are still some difficulties to be worked out, this inter-disciplinary approach has proved quite valuable in the course which I teach. Even though it requires extra work on the part of several people, to date, few have complained too loudly. Although we have yet to produce any budding Winston Churchills who could speak with his "matchless oratory" we have, hopefully, imparted some of the skills and techniques which he and all successful speakers employ. If so, the effort has been well worth it.